
Stig Thogersen, *A County of Culture: Twentieth Century China Seen from the Village Schools of Zouping, Shandong*

Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002, 310 p.

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- 1 Stig Thogersen has created a powerful account of rural China and of recurrent strategies for its transformation through education by examining the history of these changes in one particularly interesting and well-documented county. Zouping County, unexceptional in north China in most respects, was the base for Liang Shuming's Rural Reconstruction Movement (RRM) experiments in rural basic education and community development in the 1930s. In the 1980s, Zouping became the centre for a major American-funded interdisciplinary research project (of which Thogersen seems not to have been part, being located in Denmark and Australia) that has provided substantial documentation of the modern and contemporary history of this area.
- 2 Thogersen took his title from a 1958 slogan, "Fight bravely for a hundred days to create a county of culture", which he notes was to be a county of culture shared by everyone (p. 168). His book is broader in historical scope, tracing the struggle throughout the twentieth century to remake rural life through educational reform.
- 3 Thogersen departs from the efforts to reform education at the end of the Qing dynasty, laying a basis for the understanding of a continuing tension between outside reformers' goals of changing rural society by educating those who would remain there and aspirations of local students and their parents for education that would allow upward mobility and exit from the countryside. Early in the twentieth century rural schools had become a key interface between ideas of modernisation and nationalism and rural society, but had significantly alienated or physically removed students from their rural homes by opening alternative futures for them.

- 4 This situation had created a dissatisfaction to which the RRM was one response. Liang Shuming's vision was a revitalised Confucian one of pursuing spiritual perfection as a route to rebirth of the Chinese nation. Education was valued as providing moral and ethical rather than technical education, and adult education was promoted as a means of constructing rural communities. The impact of the RRM was limited in immediate terms because of the devastating interruption of war and the Japanese occupation. However, the RRM contributed to the training of a generation of students and teachers who contributed to education in later years. Interestingly, it was also a period that saw radical innovations in teaching methods more far-reaching than in the decades to follow, although some of the innovators were themselves members of or connected with the Communist Party, notably Zhang Zonglin.
- 5 The rural schools of Zouping were an intensely political location in the 1930s, and were major channels for the spread of new ideas to the countryside. Indeed, this had been the case in earlier decades as well, at least since the May Fourth Movement. By the 1930s ideas of nationalism and modernisation were linked with organisational steps, especially recruitment for the Communist Party and resistance to the Japanese occupation.
- 6 In the 1950s education in Zouping returned to less radical educational practices, although it was politicised in several respects, in its involvement with the redistribution of local political power, in efforts to change the politics of the teachers, and in the rejection of Liang Shuming's ideas in favour of advocating class struggle.
- 7 This was followed by a more radical period in which the goals were massive expansion of access to education (which especially benefited girls, who had only been marginally included up to this time), the renewed politicisation of education, and efforts to link education with economic life. Each of these aspects are traced carefully and critically, as actually implemented in Zouping. The author's major conclusion is that, despite prevalent critiques of education in the radical (and especially Cultural Revolution) period, there was a highly significant threshold crossed in these years in finally succeeding in making it the norm for everyone to attend school.
- 8 The reform era is noted for a set of significant shifts in a more conservative direction. Education is now to serve economic development rather than political purposes, the goal is to train the talented (in place of the radical emphasis on everyone) and the immediate post-Cultural Revolution expansion of upper middle schools has been curbed. The foci now are on competition and upon the nurturing of quality (*suzhi*). These policy directions from above combined with student and parent concerns to do well in the examination system have favoured conventional styles of education and intense competitive pressures.
- 9 Despite the breadth of scope of the volume, his grounding in the history of Zouping has enabled Thogersen to address each issue in depth and within its social context. He has used ample documentary records (and has been explicit where there are limitations), as well as his own retrospective interview material to trace not just shifts in policy, but also the conflicting views on policy by different segments of the population (education reformers, agents of the state, teachers, students, parents), and—most important of all—the implementation of a wide range of educational initiatives. Throughout the study local data are linked with national (and sometimes international) trends, and the book is superbly and clearly written. This is a rich, important and accessible study of a

critical aspect of change at the local (primarily county) level in twentieth century China and will be widely read and cited for years to come.

- 10 Readers will note the continuing importance of many of the apparently more historical elements in the educational history of Zouping. The contradiction between reformers' goals to educate people and keep them in the countryside clashed throughout the twentieth century with rural people's drive to use education to leave. The early and repeated efforts to attempt to provide vocational and practical training through the formal schooling system failed in almost every attempt, with education consequently remaining unconnected with the immediate training needs of the countryside. This history is illuminating and offers valuable insights for the understanding of more recent attempts in similar directions. In conclusion, the author finds encouragement in the wide spread of general education and the creation of a county of culture.